

THE BIRDS
AND OTHER
POEMS
BY

J. C. SQUIRE

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MARTIN SECKER

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THE BIRDS
AND OTHER POEMS



BOOKS BY J. C. SQUIRE

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NOTE

There was issued last year a volume, *Poems : First Series*, which contained all the poems (with a few exceptions that I did not want to reprint) I had written up to April, 1918. The present volume contains everything I have done between April 1918 and April 1919.

Certain of the poems have already appeared in *Twelve Poets*, *The New Statesman*, *The Owl*, *Land & Water*, and *The Westminster Gazette*.

To
EDMUND GOSSE



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The Birds

*Within mankind's duration, so they say,
Khephren and Ninus lived but yesterday.
Asia had no name till man was old
And long had learned the use of iron and gold ;
And æons had passed, when the first corn was planted,
Since first the use of syllables was granted.*

*Men were on earth while climates slowly swung,
Fanning wide zones to heat and cold, and long
Subsidence turned great continents to sea,
And seas dried up, dried up interminably,
Age after age ; enormous seas were dried
Amid wastes of land. And the last monsters died.*

*Earth wore another face. O since that prime
Man with how many works has sprinkled time !
Hammering, hewing, digging tunnels, roads ;
Building ships, temples, multiform abodes.
How, for his body's appetites, his toils
Have conquered all earth's products, all her soils ;
And in what thousand thousand shapes of art
He has tried to find a language for his heart !*

*Never at rest, never content or tired :
Insatiate wanderer, marvellously fired,
Most grandly piling and piling into the air
Stones that will topple or arch he knows not where.*

*And yet did I, this spring, think it more strange,
More grand, more full of awe, than all that change,
And lovely and sweet and touching unto tears,
That through man's chronicled and unchronicled
years,
And even into that unguessable beyond
The water-hen has nested by a pond,
Weaving dry flags into a beaten floor,
The one sure product of her only lore.
Low on a ledge above the shadowed water
Then, when she heard no men, as nature taught her,
Plashing around with busy scarlet bill
She built that nest, her nest, and builds it still.*

*O let your strong imagination turn
The great wheel backward, until Troy unburn,
And then unbuild, and seven Troys below
Rise out of death, and dwindle, and outflow,
Till all have passed, and none has yet been there :
Back, ever back. Our birds still crossed the air ;
Beyond our myriad changing generations
Still built, unchanged, their known habitations.
A million years before Atlantis was
Our lark sprang from some hollow in the grass,
Some old soft hoof-print in a tussock's shade ;
And the wood-pigeon's smooth snow-white eggs were
laid,
High amid green pines' sunset-coloured shafts,
And rooks their villages of twiggy rafts
Set on the tops of elms, where elms grew then,*

*And still the thumbling tit and perky wren
Popped through the tiny doors of cosy balls
And the blackbird lined with moss his high-built
walls ;*

*A round mud cottage held the thrush's young,
And straws from the untidy sparrow's hung.
And, skimming forktailed in the evening air,
When man first was were not the martens there ?
Did not those birds some human shelter crave,
And stow beneath the cornice of his cave
Their dry tight cups of clay ? And from each door
Peeped on a morning wiseheads three or four.*

*Yes, daw and owl, curlew and crested hern,
Kingfisher, mallard, water-rail and tern,
Chaffinch and greenfinch, wagtail, stonechat, ruff,
Pied warbler, robin, fly-catcher and chough,
Missel-thrush, magpie, sparrow-hawk and jay,
Built, those far ages gone, in this year's way.
And the first man who walked the cliffs of Rame,
As I this year, looked down and saw the same
Blotches of rusty red on ledge and cleft
With grey-green spots on them, while right and left
A dizzying tangle of gulls were floating and flying,
Wheeling and crossing and darting, crying and
crying,
Circling and crying, over and over and over,
Crying with swoop and hover and fall and recover.
And below on a rock against the grey sea fretted,
Pipe-necked and stationary and silhouetted,*

*Cormorants stood in a wise, black, equal row
Above the nests and long blue eggs we know.*

*O delicate chain over all the ages stretched,
O dumb tradition from what far darkness fetched :
Each little architect with its one design
Perpetual, fixed and right in stuff and line,
Each little ministrant who knows one thing,
One learned rite to celebrate the spring.
Whatever alters else on sea or shore,
These are unchanging : man must still explore.*

Processes of Thought

I

I find my mind as it were a deep water.

*Sometimes I play with a thought and hammer and
bend it,
Till tired and displeased with that I toss it away,
Or absently let it slip to the yawning water :
And down it sinks, forgotten for many a day.*

*But a time comes when tide or tempest washes it
High on the beach, and I find that shape of mine,
Or I haul it out from the depths on some casual rope,
Or, passing over that spot in quiet shine,*

*I see, where my boat's shadow makes deep the water,
A patch of colour, far down, from the bottom apart,
A wavering sign like the gleam from an ancient
anchor,
Brown fixing and fleeting flakes ; and I feel my
heart*

*Wake to a strange excitement ; so that I stop,
Put up my paddles and dredge with a careful net :
And I catch it, and see it stir, and feel its weight,
And pull till it nears and breaks from the water wet.*

*And my eyes dwell on that old abandoned thing
Recovered by chance. For the shape I had found so
dull
Has crusted and changed in secrecy and silence,
And its surface shines like a pearl, most beautiful.*

II

*In bed I lie, and my thoughts come filing by,
All forms and faces, cheerful, serene and sad :
Some clear, some mistily showing and fragmentary,
Some altered in size or shape since last they were
seen.*

*But O last, you group of merry ones !
Lord knows when I saw you before, but I met you
once,
The whole collection of you, impudent-eyed ;
And now, rosy and grinning, with linked arms
You go swingingly by, turning your faces to mine,
I laugh aloud ; you bad lots ; you are a secret,
That nobody else knows.*

*And you it was that made me break the procession
(While memory gave me still the power of summons),
And call up all I could of a half-hour's thoughts
To parade them across this proscenium of my skull
In the order they came in, more carefully recognising
The old, and remarking which have developed or
changed.*

*And as for you, you rogues, I am almost certain
There are one or two more of you now than once
there were.*

* * * *

*Good-bye ! Good-bye ! Dance through the dark
door*

In to the life that somewhere else you lead.

And one day I shall all unwittingly call

Some word you know as a signal, or you'll see

*Someone else coming my way ; you'll suddenly
follow,*

And you'll appear again, quite possibly

Bringing new friends—who are sure to be just as bad.

III

*Into the pits of my heart and brain,
My eyes, ears, nose, tongue, fingers, like five
gardeners
Are shovelling sights, sounds, odours, savours, contacts,
While I, their master, casually nod, and most times
Stand idly by, looking at something else,
Forgetting that the work is going on
And only fully conscious of my servants
When something they move is consonant with my
mood
And draws my notice ; or some other thing,
More strange than usual or stronger in its impact
Makes them exclaim and call to bid me watch.*

*And then in a ground of more than our dimensions
Those quietly flowing cascades of things are hid.
They are buried in those illimitable fields,
And ever as they are swallowed by the earth
The steady hours passing in procession
Walk over them and trample them well down
Out of sight, levelling all the soil.*

*Then some time my returning feet uncover them
(My slaves are all agog with recognition)
Or else perhaps I come and idly dig
To see what thing I can find, and out there comes
Some old form buried twenty years ago
Now called a memory.*

*Or marking well the place where one was put
Find it and more, drawn thither under the ground,
Tangled with others as flower-roots with roots
Into a new festoon, or one old image,
Wearing others like gems. And that's creation.*

Airship over Suburb

A smooth blue sky with puffed motionless clouds.

*Standing over the plain of red roofs and bushy trees
The bright coloured shell of the large enamelled sky.*

*Out of the distance pointing, a cut dark shape
That moves this way at leisure, then hesitates and
turns :*

*And its darkness suddenly dies as it turns and shows
A gleaming silver, white against even the whitest
cloud.*

*Across the blue and the low small clouds it moves
Level, with a floating cloud-like motion of its own,
Peaceful, sunny and slow, a thing of summer itself,
Above the basking earth, travelling the clouds and
the sky.*

Harlequin

*Moonlit woodland, veils of green,
Caves of empty dark between ;
Veils of green from rounded arms
Drooping, that the moonlight charms.
Tranced the trees, grass beneath
Silent. . . .*

*Like a stealthy breath,
Mask and wand and silver skin,
Sudden enters Harlequin.*

*Hist ! Hist ! Watch him go,
Leaping limb and pointing toe,
Slender arms that float and flow,
Curving wand above, below ;
Flying, gliding, changing feet ;
Onset merging in retreat.
Not a shadow of sound there is
But his motion's gentle hiss,
Till one fluent arm and hand
Suddenly circles, and the wand
Taps a bough far overhead,
" Crack," and then all noise is dead.
For he halts, and for a space
Stands erect with upward face,
Taut and tense to the white
Message of the moon's light.*

*What is he thinking of, you ask ;
Caught you the eyes behind the mask ?
Whence did he come, where would he go ?
Answers but the resuming flow
Of that swift continuous glide,
Whispering from side to side,
Silvered boughs, branches dim,
All the world's a frame for him ;
All the trees standing around
On the fascinated ground,
See him swifter, swifter, sweep,
Dazzling, till one wildest leap . . .
Whisht ! he kneels. And he listens.
How his steady silver glistens.*

*He was listening ; he was there ;
Flash ! he went. To the air
He a waiting ear had bent,
Silent ; but before he went
Something somewhere else to seek,
He moved his lips as though to speak.*

*And we wait, and in vain,
For he will not come again.
Earth, grass, wood, and air,
As we stare, and we stare,
Which that fierce life did hold,
Tired, dim, void, cold.*

Winter Nightfall

*The old yellow stucco
Of the time of the Regent
Is flaking and peeling :
The rows of square windows
In the straight yellow building
Are empty and still ;
And the dusty dark evergreens
Guarding the wicket
Are draped with wet cobwebs,
And above this poor wilderness
Toneless and sombre
Is the flat of the hill.*

*They said that a colonel
Who long ago died here
Was the last one to live here :
An old retired colonel,
Some Fraser or Murray,
I don't know his name ;
Death came here and summoned him,
And the shells of him vanished
Beyond all speculation ;
And silence resumed here,
Silence and emptiness,
And nobody came.*

*Was it wet when he lived here,
Were the skies dun and hurrying,
Was the rain so irresolute ?
Did he watch the night coming,
Did he shiver at nightfall
Before he was dead ?
Did the wind go so creepily,
Chilly and puffing,
With drops of cold rain in it ?
Was the hill's lifted shoulder
So lowering and menacing,
So dark and so dread ?*

*Did he turn through his doorway
And go to his study,
And light many candles ?
And fold in the shutters,
And heap up the fireplace
To fight off the damp ?
And muse on his boyhood,
And wonder if India
Ever was real ?
And shut out the loneliness
With pig-sticking memoirs
And collections of stamps ?*

*Perhaps. But he's gone now,
He and his furniture
Dispersed now for ever ;
And the last of his trophies,*

*Antlers and photographs,
Heaven knows where.
And there's grass in his gateway,
Grass on his footpath,
Grass on his door-step ;
The garden's grown over,
The well-chain is broken,
The windows are bare.*

*And I leave him behind me,
For the straggling, discoloured
Rags of the daylight,
And hills and stone walls
And a rick long forgotten
Of blackening hay :
The road pale and sticky,
And cart-ruts and nail marks,
And wind-ruffled puddles,
And the slop of my footsteps
In this desolate country's
Cadaverous clay.*

Song

*You are my sky ; beneath your circling kindness
My meadows all take in the light and grow ;
Laugh with the joy you've given,
The joy you've given,
And open in a thousand buds, and blow.*

*But when you are sombre, sad, averse, forgetful,
Heavily veiled by clouds that brood with rain,
Dumbly I lie all shadowed,
I lie all shadowed,
And dumbly wait for you to shine again.*

Song

*The heaven is full of the moon's light,
The earth fades below.
In this vast empty world of night
I only know.*

*Pale-shining trees and moonlit fields,
The bird's tune,
And my night-flowering heart that yields
Her fragrance to the moon.*

A Far Place

*Sheltered, when the rain blew over the hills it was,
Sunny all day when the days of summer were long,
Beyond all rumour of labouring towns it was,
But at dawn and evening its trees were noisy with
song.*

*There were four elms on the southward lawn standing,
Their great trunks evenly set in a square
Of shadowed grass in spring pierced with crocuses,
And their tops met high in the empty air.*

*Where the morning rose the grey church was below
us,
If we stood by the porch we saw on either hand
The ground falling, the trees falling, and meadows,
A river, hamlets and spires : a chequered land,*

*A wide country where cloud shadows went chasing
Mile after mile, diminishing fast, until
They met the far blue downs ; but round the corner
The western garden lay lonely under the hill.*

*And closed in the western garden, under the hillside,
Where silence was and the rest of the world was gone,
We saw and took the curving year's munificence :
Changing from flower to flower the garden shone.*

*Early its walks were fringed with little rock-plants,
Sprays and tufts of blossom, white, yellow, and blue,
And all about were sprinkled stars of narcissus,
And swathes of tulips all over the garden grew.*

*White groups and pink, red, crimson and lemon-
yellow,
And the yellow-and-red-streaked tulips once loved
by a boy ;
Red and yellow their stiff and varnished petals,
And the scent of them stings me still with a youthful
joy.*

*And in the season of perfect and frailest beauty,
Pear-blossom broke and the lilacs' waxen cones,
And a tranced laburnum trailing its veils of yellow
Tenderly drooped over the ivied stones.*

*The lilacs browned, a breath dried the laburnum,
The swollen peonies scattered the earth with blood,
And the rhododendrons shed their sumptuous mantles,
And the marshalled irises unsceptred stood.*

*And the borders filled with daisies and pied sweet-
williams,
And busy pansies ; and there as we gazed and
dreamed,
And breathed the swooning smell of the packed car-
nations,
The present was always the crown of all : it seemed*

*Each month more beautiful sprang from a robe dis-
carded,
The year all effortless dropt the best away
And struck the heart with loveliness new, more
lavish ;
When the clambering rose had blown and died, by day*

*The broad-leaved tapering many-shielded hollyhocks
Stood like pillars and shone to the August sun,
The glimmering cups of waking evening primroses
Filled the dusk now the scent of the rose was done.*

*A wall there was and a door to the rose-garden,
And out of that a gate to the orchard led,
And there was the last hedge, and the turf sloped
upward
Till the sky was cut by the hill's line overhead.*

*And thither at times we climbed, and far below us
That world that had made the world remote was seen,
Small, a huddle of russet roofs and chimneys,
And its guard of elms like bushes against the green :*

*One spot in the country, little and mild and homely,
The nearest house of a wide, populous plain. . . .
But down at evening under the stars and the branches
In the whispering garden we lost the world again.*

*Whispering, faint, the garden under the hillside . . .
Under the stars. . . . Is it true that we lived there
long ?*

*Was it certainly so ? Did ever we know that dwelling,
Breathe that night, and hear in the night that song ?*



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